

VZCZCXRO3629
OO RUEHDBU RUEHIK RUEHYG
DE RUEHBUL #0178/01 0200538

ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 200538Z JAN 07
FM AMEMBASSY KABUL

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 5542
INFO RUCNAFG/AFGHANISTAN COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEHZG/NATO EU COLLECTIVE PRIORITY
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHEFDIA/DIA WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/OSD WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUEKJCS/JOINT STAFF WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RHMFIUU/HQ USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL PRIORITY
RHEHAAA/NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC PRIORITY
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK PRIORITY 3526

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 03 KABUL 000178

SIPDIS

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SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR SCA/FO DAS GASTRIGHT, SCA/A
STATE PASS TO USAID FOR AID/ANE, AID/DCHA/DG
NSC FOR HARRIMAN
OSD FOR KIMMITT
CENTCOM FOR CG CFC-A, CG CJTF-76 POLAD

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [MCAP](#) [MOPS](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PTER](#) [PHUM](#) [AF](#)
SUBJECT: BOUCHER SEES COMPREHENSIVE STRATEGY WORKING IN
PANJSHIR PROVICE

Summary

¶1. (U) During his January 10 visit to Panjshir Valley, Assistant Secretary for South and Central Asian Affairs Richard Boucher heard an extensive analysis of the province from its Governor, Haji Bahlul. The Governor portrayed Panjshir as free of terrorist activity, official corruption and poppy cultivation. In response to the Assistant Secretary's question) "why is Panjshir different?") the Governor noted his province and the U.S. shared strategic interests, born of common experience in September 2001 when terrorists struck first against mujahideen leader Massoud and then against the American homeland.

¶2. (U) Assistant Secretary Boucher visited Panjshir, accompanied by his Senior Advisor, Caitlin Hayden, Embassy Political Officer Kimberly McClure and USAID Provincial Reconstruction Team Deputy Director David Billings. They met with General Qassim, the community liaison for the USAID-funded road construction; attended a session of the Provincial Development Council, which was discussing budget decisions; toured the Provincial Reconstruction Team office site and talked with Team members; met with Panjshir Governor Bahlul and discussed topics covered in this message; and concluded their program with a tour of the tomb of the slain mujahideen leader Ahmed Shah Massoud. End Summary.

State of the Province

¶3. (U) Panjshir, the Governor led off, was "the beating heart of the Hindu Kush." It was a new province but had a long history of resistance, first against the Soviets and then the Taliban. Today it remained a secure environment and free from the scourge of corruption. It also remained opposed to the Taliban and terrorism in general. After the years of strife, the province was ready for peace and eager to rebuild. It sought to stand on its own two feet.

¶4. (U) Panjshir was also free of poppy cultivation and drug

trafficking, he said. A few years ago, there were some poppy fields in the valley, which had little other economic activity, but they were stamped out. The Governor said he was pleased that the Ministry of Counter Narcotics had recognized Panjshir as clean on poppy and thus eligible for \$500,000 under the Good Performance Fund.

15. (U) Panjshir, the Governor said, was poised to develop. The USAID-funded road through the southern third of the valley was the lynchpin. It would connect Panjshir to Kabul, thus facilitating the transport of goods to the metropolitan market. It would also link Kabul to Panjshir, thus increasing the flow of tourism and investment into the valley. If extended in the other, north-east direction, the road would recreate an ancient Silk Road connection to Badakhshan and ultimately China.

16. (U) The provincial administration was making a push for more electricity and more diversified energy sources. Indeed energy was a top priority in the recent 5-year provincial plan, ranking with road and canal construction. The Governor identified one of his key tasks as building infrastructure in sync with the Afghan National Development Strategy.

17. (U) Turning to education in response to Boucher's question, the Governor outlined two main stumbling blocks. First, Panjshir had only 25 school buildings, insufficient for the 50,000 students, many of whom had to attend school in tents. Second, Panjshir had difficulty in retaining trained teachers, who made on average only 50 U.S. dollars per month. The higher salaries offered by nongovernmental organizations and the international community lured many teachers away. The Teachers, Training College, a converted Ministry of Defense facility opened last year, was a good start, the

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first of its kind in the province. That said, the infrastructure element of education was easy to address compared to the human element.

18. (U) On health care, the Governor painted a more positive picture. There was no comparison with standards in the West, but Panjshir's medical facilities were good compared to those elsewhere in Afghanistan. Some of them, such as the Emergency Hospital run by a non-governmental organization, dated from the struggle against the Taliban.

Pulse of the People

19. (U) Panjshir, the Governor said, was a narrow valley with a wide perspective. Panjshiris had a proclivity to leave their homes and settle throughout Afghanistan and indeed the region. They were entrepreneurial and adaptable. They also represented an untapped source of investment in their home province. "I'm doing everything in my power to attract them, with offers of security, peace and even land." The Governor believed Panjshiris would return if they saw opportunities in education and employment.

110. (SBU) Panjshiris were weary of war, he continued, one reason they were serious about security in their valley. One group of Panjshiris, however, had suffered disproportionately: the mujahideen. Some 12,000 had fallen in the resistance. Those who survived faced unemployment after demobilization and disarmament; they had participated in the Disarmament, Demobilization and Reintegration program and received only \$300, paid in small installments, as severance. Many had tried to sign up for the Afghan army or police, but "like me," the Governor added, lacked formal qualifications and "book learning." This was a travesty, the Governor said, since the former mujahideen had extensive hands-on experience in the profession of arms, and yet could not qualify for the army or police. The Governor said he had approached both Afghan and international security officials to recommend the

former mujahideen as an auxiliary force who could help defeat the Taliban.

Government Links

¶11. (SBU) The Governor noted that links with the central government in Kabul had both good and bad aspects. He cited, as a negative example, his new office building, which had been under construction for two years. The Ministry of Interior had let the contract, which had gone to a company with family connections in the Ministry and with an evident interest in skimming some of the funds. "My patience is running out," the Governor concluded. He also voiced irritation that President Karzai, despite several invitations, had not visited Panjshir. (Note: Assistant Secretary Boucher passed this request on to President Karzai

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in Kabul later that day.)

¶12. (U) The line directors, representing their Afghan ministries in Panjshir, were important connecting ligaments. They had recently passed up their strategic plan and awaited response from the central government. On the flip side, the Panjshiri representatives in the central government, while high ranking, did not attend to the province sufficiently; their visits to home valley were usually personal rather than official.

¶13. (U) Asked about his own presence in Kabul, the Governor contended that he had little access to the central government. He had no time to waste in waiting for weeks to arrange appointments. He backed off his description, however, when pushed. (Provincial Reconstruction Team Comment: In fact, Bahlul has emerged as a strong lobbyist for his province in central government

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corridors. End Comment.)

Provincial Reconstruction Team Ties

¶14. (U) The Governor called his relationship with the Provincial Reconstruction Team "a strong partnership." He cited various examples of cooperation on specific projects, such as the Teachers, Training College, where the Provincial Reconstruction Team is helping improve the facility (see para 7); a printing press, furnished by the Provincial Reconstruction Team to help disseminate news; and medical assistance, which the Provincial Reconstruction Team takes out to remote villages.

U.S. Relations

¶15. (U) Panjshir's ties with the U.S., the Governor said, were close, forged in the tragedies of September 2001, when terrorists assassinated Ahmed Shah Massoud on Sept. 9 and then attacked the U.S. two days later. Thus there was a strategic alignment, born of common historical experience. That was one reason the province was secure for the American Provincial Reconstruction Team presence) and one answer to Boucher's question, "why is Panjshir different?"

¶16. (U) Clearly up on his news, the Governor asked Boucher about recent statements by new Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi, particularly whether more troops for Iraq meant fewer in Afghanistan and whether he expected any change in policy with a new Congress. In response to these questions from the Governor, Boucher explained U.S. policy on Afghanistan and the Region and reiterated our firm commitment to Afghanistan. The Governor offered his support for the policy, spelled out

by President Bush and Prime Minister Blair at the Riga NATO summit, on fighting terrorism.

¶17. (U) The Governor also recalled that the U.S. had failed to heed Massoud's warnings over the threat posed by bin Laden; then September 2001 had come. Mindful of this trauma, the Governor said, the international community should not abandon Afghanistan again.

Bio Info

¶18. (U) The Governor recounted his three-year experience in Iran, after he and Massoud had a falling out and Bahlul had taken his family to Tehran. The Bahlul children attended school there, but Bahlul himself remained unemployed. It was not until President Karzai, while visiting Tehran in early 2005, asked him to accept the position of Governor, that Bahlul returned to Panjshir with his family.

¶19. (U) The Governor portrayed himself as a public servant, dedicated to the people of Panjshir and striving to advance their interests. He was prepared to put up with his low salary, USD 900 a month, to stay as Governor, but he was also ready, if asked, to give up the job.

¶20. (U) There were two types of people, the Governor stated. Some people, while rich, were inherently dissatisfied; even a big bank account in Dubai could not make them happy. Others, while not well off, were well centered; they woke up every morning sensing the joy of living. He put himself in the latter category.

¶21. (U) This cable has been cleared by SCA Senior Advisor Caitlin Hayden.

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